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SUBJECT: NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE PLANS FOR CENTRAL
ASIA, EASTERN EUROPE

Classified By: Political Counselor Kristen Bauer for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff had a wide-ranging, two-hour meeting with the heads of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC), a prominent human rights organization with initiatives in many Eastern European and Central Asian countries. Of greatest interest is NHC's quasi-covert attempt to penetrate Turkmenistan's media curtain. Human rights conditions in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Byelarus, Russia, were also discussed. The NHC is considering inviting a high-level U.S. congressional delegation to Norway for discussions on salient issues in the aforementioned countries. End Summary.

12. (U) Poloff met with Bjorn Engesland, Secretary General, and Gunnar Slydal, Deputy Secretary General of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC). The NHC receives part of its funding from the GON, and is the human rights organization most focused on issues in former communist countries.

Turkmenistan

13. (C) In Turkmenistan, the NHC works closely with the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute. The NHC is working to start an internet site for Turkmen (based in Brussels) as well as a radio station that would broadcast news into Turkmenistan from another nearby country. The NHC's involvement in both endeavors would be cloaked by independent foundations. Engesland and Slydal were reluctant to talk about details, and this information was treated by them as highly confidential.

Kyrgyzstan

14. (C) Engesland thanked the USG profusely for volunteering its help in the recent trial of its regional representative in Kyrgyzstan. Interestingly, Engesland said that the reason for the sudden attacks by the GOK against the NHC was the fact that the NHC began offering grants for Uzbek human rights organizations. The NHC intends to attempt to cooperate fully with the government, despite Engesland's admission that the charges were ludicrous.

Kazakhstan

15. (C) The NHC intends to step up activity in Kazakhstan in relation to their upcoming chairmanship of the OSCE. Engesland said the Kazakh authorities are extremely suspicious of NGOs, especially those that work with religion

or religious freedom, as they are perceived to meddle with state control or, even worse, conduct espionage. Engesland said it was ironic that Kazakhstan was intending to prioritize terrorism and "tolerance" as issues during its chairmanship.

Byelarus

¶6. (C) Engesland said it was "very difficult to see how things will change" in Byelarus, and said the NGO community feared that the Byelarusian "signals" of change would be misinterpreted by western countries and "validated" by the OSCE and the EU. "These signals have no substance behind them," said Egesland, who had just returned from a two week trip to the country. NHC supports civil society in Byelarus and keeps in close contact with the democratic opposition and human rights NGOs. The NHC will invite a delegation of Byelarusian politicians to Norway this year, both to raise the country's profile in Norway, and to encourage communication with Norwegian politicians and groups.

Russia

¶7. (C) NHC has an education project in the Barents (northern) region of Russia, in which students from Norway are brought to interact in a weeklong program on human rights and tolerance. Russian teachers, journalists, police, and prison officials are also involved in the program. The objective is to start a dialogue and plant the seeds of future cooperation on human rights matters. On the other hand, the NHC has

recently had a very public debate in the Norwegian paper of record (Aftenposten) with the Russian ambassador concerning claims of Georgian "atrocities" in South Ossetia. The NHC disputed the Russians' justifications for war with Georgia.

U.S. Issues

¶8. (SBU) Engesland brought up Guantanamo and the death penalty--continuing sources of concern for all Norwegian human rights organizations. Engesland visited death row at Livingston prison in Texas in 2004 and had a "strong learning experience." On the same trip, he met with conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute to talk about Guantanamo and the War on Terror. Significantly, the NHC is considering inviting members of Congress who are "Friends of the NHC," which includes Hillary Clinton among others, to a meeting in Norway concerning the future of the OSCE, developments in Central Asia and the CIS.

JOHNSON